

## MACAULAY'S CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

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had carefully read the ancient historians, noted what seemed to him their merits and defects, and drawn from his examination of them very definite conclusions as to the way in which history should be written. He illustrates his conception of the art of writing history by a comparison with the analogous art of portrait painting. The portrait painter, he says, does not try to reproduce all the minutest details of the face of his sitter. So too the historian must not try to relate all the minutest details of the past. As a picture cannot be exactly like the original, so a history cannot exactly reproduce the facts.

History cannot be perfectly and absolutely true for to be perfectly and absolutely true, it ought to record *all* the slightest particulars of the slightest transactions—all the things done, and all the words uttered, during the time of which it treats. The omission of any circumstance, however insignificant, would be a defect. If history were written thus, the Bodleian library would not contain the occurrences of a week. What is told in the fullest and most accurate annals bears an infinitely small proportion to what is suppressed. . . . No picture, then, and no history, can present us with the whole truth : but those are the best pictures and the best histories which exhibit such parts of the truth as most nearly produce the effect of the whole.<sup>1</sup>

Macauley's argument is that the business of the his-

torian is to select the important and significant facts and details from the mass, and so to combine them that they produce a faithful representation of the portion of the past related.

He illustrates his view about the combination and arrangement of the facts by another comparison—this time with the art of landscape painting.

<sup>1</sup> Edinburgh Review, May 1828, p. 338.